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ABSTRACT

An informal study explored the difficulties of writing teachers who are asked to set aside preferred ways of viewing student writing for state-mandated criteria when serving as evaluators for state-mandated tests, such as Florida's College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST). Twelve high school, community college, and university-level writing teachers completed questionnaires and were interviewed to determine whether they prefer intuitive or sensory perception, and to learn how they evaluate student writing. Results indicated that many writing teachers continue to focus on limited, product-based criteria. Furthermore, state-mandated testing such as Florida's CLAST essay examination could quite possibly be having an extremely negative impact on what is being taught in writing classrooms. Writing teachers who serve as evaluators of product-based writing tests are becoming increasingly comfortable with applying out-dated, product-based standards to writing, and are even finding themselves applying these standards to their own students' writing. Entire English departments are being trained in CLAST scoring strategies and are applying its limited, product-based criteria. Writing teachers should not have to set aside preferred ways of viewing student writing when asked to serve as evaluators for state-mandated tests. (PRA)

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Deborah L. Coxwell

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Deborah L. Coxwell

The Clash Between Teachers' Personal Views of Student Writing and Views Imposed by the State

Contemporary personality theory and research suggests that there are two ways of perceiving--sensing and intuitive. Personality theorists explain that when using sensory perception, we pay attention to the information provided to us directly through our five senses, and when using intuitive perception we pay attention to things other than concrete information--to associations or hunches beyond the actual sensory data. In Personality Theory and the Teaching of Composition, John DiTiberio and George Jensen point out that as many as 90% of college English teachers may prefer intuitive perception, but that we all can and do use both kinds depending on the situation. I would like to bring to your attention a situation which requires many English teachers to put aside their preference for intuitive perception--for considering possibilities suggested by the text--and instead, consider only the concrete information before them. The situation to which I am referring is the scoring of essay exams for purposes of assessment such as the one which makes up part of Florida's College Level Academic Skills Test, commonly referred to as the "CLAST."

Since 1984, Florida law has required that students pass the CLAST before being awarded an associate of arts degree or being admitted to upper-division status in a state university in Florida. Currently, three other states--Georgia, Texas, and New Jersey--have laws which require college students to pass similar

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examinations, and many other states are considering passing such legislation. The Florida Department of Education's CLAST Technical Report states that "the CLAST is part of Florida's continuing effort to assure that its students acquire the academic skills expected of them" (1). This report goes on to explain that the CLAST is an achievement test consisting of subtests in essay, English language skills, reading and mathematics. Each of the subtests, except for the essay, is composed of multiple-choice questions. CLAST essays are scored holistically by high school, community college, and university English teachers. Raters are instructed to read each essay quickly to get an overall sense of the paper and to assign a holistic score of 1, 2, 3, or 4. Each essay is scored by at least two raters, and consequently, a combined score of eight points is the highest possible score an essay may receive. In order for an essay to pass, it must receive a combined score of at least four points--each rater must give it a minimum score of "2."

CLAST essay raters are instructed in the criteria they are to use in judging the essays. Each essay should contain a clearly stated thesis which is developed logically and in sufficient detail. Sentences and paragraphs should be "well-formed." Language should be used "appropriately and effectively," and standard practices in spelling, punctuation, and grammar should have been followed. Raters are to consider only the written texts. They are not to consider whether or not

it is fair to expect students to write an essay which meets these criteria in 60 minutes on a topic they have never before considered. A rater is not supposed to worry that she teaches process, not product--that she teaches writing as a gradually evolving, recursive process which requires adequate time for conception, incubation, discovery, drafting, and revising--but then her students are told they cannot proceed with their college educations unless they are able to write an "acceptable" essay according to CLAST criteria in a 60-minute period. While rating CLAST essays, a writing teacher is not supposed to bother himself with the knowledge that in his classroom he emphasizes the importance of his students becoming involved in and with the subject they have chosen and that he teaches them to view writing as thinking, drafting, and revising, but then his students have to pass an essay test which requires them to be proficient at quick topic selection, formulaic organization, grammar, and mechanics. A rater is not to speculate that the student text she is reading was most assuredly written by someone whose native language is not English, and that if only given the opportunity to take the piece of writing through another draft or refer to a handbook or dictionary, the essay would be "correct" enough to pass CLAST standards. Raters are not to think about the possibilities of a piece of writing upon revision. They are instructed to consider only the text before them, how successfully that text meets the established criteria, and how the text compares to the "range finders" presented in the

training sessions. During these sessions, sample student essays are presented which are representative of the types of papers which should receive 1s, 2s, 3s, and 4s. Emphasis in these sessions is on becoming adept at placing the "appropriate" score on the piece of student writing.

What sorts of difficulties and conflicts do teachers of writing have to deal with when asked to put aside their preferred ways of viewing student texts, and instead, use state-mandated criteria to assess student writing. This is the issue I am currently studying.

Twelve teachers of writing at the high school, community college, and university levels who also serve as raters of CLAST essays were involved in the preliminary research I will share with you. They completed questionnaires which supplied me with two types of data: 1) information which indicated whether they tend to prefer intuitive or sensory perception, and 2) information relating to how they go about evaluating student writing. Additional information was obtained through personal interviews. I asked these writing teachers to explain how they typically go about evaluating pieces of writing composed by the students they teach and how that typical method of evaluation differs from the way they are instructed to score CLAST essays. I asked them what sorts of conflicts they found themselves having to deal with when asked to put aside their usual ways of evaluating student writing and instead, assess student writing using the criteria specified by the state.

The data I collected revealed that two-thirds of the English teachers involved in the study clearly prefer intuitive perception, and the remaining one-third indicated that they have no preference for one way or the other--that the way they perceive depends on the specific situation. This information came as no surprise.

Data from the writing teachers also revealed a wide range of preferred methods for evaluating texts written by the students they teach. While several of the writing teachers described product-oriented evaluative techniques which focus on surface features of student writing, others focus on the ideas the student writers present in their papers and on how successfully those ideas are conveyed. Others pointed out that the criteria they use to evaluate student writing change from one writing assignment to another, and several teachers explained that their evaluation procedures focus primarily on the writing process.

One high school teacher explained, "In the first reading I look for a thesis, then see if it is adhered to, supported, and restated in the conclusion. In a second reading I seek out mistakes in sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, syntax, and grammar." A university professor explained his usual method of evaluating student texts by saying, "I read for an introduction, body, and conclusion. Then I read for general content and grammatical structure."

In contrast to these product-oriented approaches to evaluation are responses that indicate a strong emphasis on the

ideas contained in the piece of writing and on how successfully the writer conveys those ideas. One community college teacher explained: "My primary emphasis is on the content of the paper. I don't copy-edit anymore. I'm not a school marm." A university professor stated that her primary focus is on how well the writer conveys his/her ideas to a reader: "First, I read the papers holistically with an eye toward the writer's purpose and thesis and how well these are developed and articulated. A second reading helps me make suggestions, ask questions, and point out grammatical errors (if necessary). My final evaluation considers how well the writer conveyed his/her ideas."

Two writing instructors, one at the university level and another who teaches high school, explained that the criteria they use for evaluating student writing are likely to change from one paper to another, depending on what they have been focusing on in the writing class. "As I read an essay for evaluation, I generally try to measure it against whatever criteria I have been using in class," one of them stated. "Those criteria may therefore change from assignment to assignment. Once I have read several papers, I tend to use them--loosely--as an additional standard by which to judge subsequent papers." He went on to explain that it is important to him that his students realize the subjectivity involved in evaluation: "Recognizing the subjectivity of much evaluation, I prefer to acknowledge that subjectivity openly by using lots of 'I think' or 'I like/dislike' comments."

Two other writing teachers--one at a community college and another at the university level--commented that their focus in evaluating student writing is not on individual pieces of writing but, instead, on the writing process: "I read their drafts as they write and respond to the ideas--the content--in early drafts, and then to organization, structure, and finally mechanics in later drafts of the papers," one of the teachers explained. "I don't grade individual pieces; I grade portfolios of work at the end of the semester that reflect their writing processes throughout the term."

In response to the question regarding how their typical methods of evaluating student writing differ from the way they are instructed to rate CLAST essays, the majority of the writing teachers explained that the primary difference is that when evaluating CLAST essays, there is time for only one reading of the paper and that they are not allowed to make any marks, comments, or suggestions on the piece of student writing. With CLAST evaluation, they are instructed to read holistically, keeping in mind the state-specified writing criteria. Several writing teachers involved in the study stated that while they normally focus on matters of structure and correctness when evaluating texts written by their students, they try to focus on no one specific criteria when scoring CLAST essays since they are instructed to view the papers holistically, not allowing any one criteria to carry more weight than another.

Another comment concerning the differences between the

manner in which they typically go about evaluating writing composed by students they teach and the way they are instructed to rate CLAST essays relates to the fact that CLAST writing is first draft/last draft writing. A community college writing teacher commented that when he rates essays written by students he teaches he looks beyond the text, thinking of ways the writer might improve the writing in the next draft; but when assessing CLAST essays, he explains, "What you read is what you get, so there's no point in thinking about what the piece needs upon revision." A university-level writing teacher who evaluates portfolios of student writing at the end of each semester stated that the way she evaluates writing composed by the students she teaches and the way she assesses CLAST writing are totally different. "The CLAST essay has specified criteria it must be measured against and a numerical system of four broad categories for scoring. This approach to assessment is nothing like what I do in my classroom where the emphasis is on the process of writing--on drafting and revising and the students developing as writers."

Another writing teacher whose classroom approach to evaluation is quite different from CLAST assessment procedures explained that when scoring CLAST essays, he tries to turn himself into a "grading machine": "For CLAST scorings, I try to turn myself into an impersonal measurer--that is, I hold the essay up to the standards and assign it the 'appropriate' score. I try to remove subjectivity--to turn myself into an objective

machine of sorts. I therefore often assign scores that differ from scores I would assign in a classroom setting."

While these teachers commented on how very different their preferred ways of evaluating student writing are from the CLAST assessment procedures, others commented on the effect the CLAST assessment procedures have had on the way they evaluate their students' writing. Five of the 12 writing teachers involved in this preliminary research commented that the assessment techniques they have become adept at using through their experiences as CLAST graders have affected the way they go about evaluating essays written by their students. A writing teacher at the university level commented: "I think that I have (perhaps unconsciously) transferred the approach taught for CLAST essay grading over to my regular grading: I have tended progressively to think less and less in terms of separate evaluative categories (grammar/content, etc.) in determining grades." A community college teacher stated, "Often I grade holistically without the second reading, especially with impromptu essays written by students in my classes." While these teachers referred to using holistic scoring techniques in their classrooms, others referred specifically to applying product-based CLAST criteria to their students' writing. One teacher explained that the all the members of her department have been trained in CLAST assessment techniques and that they use the CLAST criteria to assess in-class essays written by their students. "Our entire department has learned how to score in-class papers using the same criteria

that are used when rating CLAST essays," she explained.

Finally, I asked each of the writing teachers what sorts of conflicts they found themselves having to deal with when asked to put aside their usual ways of evaluating student writing, and instead, assess CLAST essays using the criteria specified by the state. Much to my surprise, only four of the 12 writing teachers involved in the preliminary research felt that they had any conflicts to deal with. Of these four, two teach writing at the high school level, one at the community college, and the other at the university. The other eight writing teachers explained that they have no problems with keeping the two tasks completely separate. Of the teachers who described conflicts, two of them are writing teachers who focus on matters of grammar and correctness in evaluating their students' writing. They explained that even though they are instructed to holistically view CLAST essays, attaching no more weight to one specified criteria than to another, this is not always easy for them. "In reading CLAST essays, I find myself particularly watching for comma splices, sentence fragments, and spelling errors. I probably attach more importance to these than CLAST Scoring Guidelines suggest." Another teacher who prefers a product-oriented approach to the teaching and evaluating of student writing stated: "I know I tend to put more value on spelling and grammar errors than some other CLAST graders." One of the writing teachers who emphasizes a process approach to writing in his classroom revealed that even with CLAST scoring, he tends to

overlook surface errors and focus primarily on the ideas the student is trying to get across. "While reading CLAST essays, I focus on the the message--the content--the ideas the student is trying to convey. I'm hardly the surface error school marm either with my classroom evaluation or on the CLAST." He went on to say that when scoring CLAST essays, he has to remind himself not to think about what the piece of writing needs upon revision. "I have to constantly remind myself that this is it--that there is no possibility of another draft."

The majority of the teachers, however, eight of the 12, reported that they have no difficulties in considering only the text before them when scoring CLAST essays. "I approach the two tasks with such wholly different attitudes," stated one teacher. "One has absolutely no effect on the other." Another teacher explained that he makes a conscious effort not to allow his preferred method of evaluating student writing to affect the way he evaluates essays for purposes of CLAST: "I think it's something I fight against--I try to suspend my 'teacher self' to become an 'evaluator' when rating CLAST essays.' Other teachers who reported no conflicts were those teachers who stated that they often apply CLAST standards to the writing of their own students. "Instead of my usual classroom evaluation procedures affecting the way I rate CLAST writing, I think it's the other way around. More and more frequently, I'm using CLAST procedures and techniques to score my students' writing--especially their in-class writing."

What do I conclude from the findings of my preliminary research? First, that more extensive research needs to be conducted regarding the clash between teachers preferred ways of viewing student writing and views imposed by the state. The preliminary findings I have shared with you were obtained from a small group of 12 writing teachers from the North Florida area. While teachers from the high school, community college, and university levels were represented, more extensive research needs to be conducted with a much larger, more representative group from a more widespread geographical area.

From this preliminary data I also conclude that even though current composition research and theory emphasizes the importance of teaching process, not product, that research and theory have not yet actually had the widespread impact on what goes on in writing classrooms that many of us would like to think they have had. Many writing teachers at all levels continue to focus on limited, product-based criteria.

And most important of all, I conclude that state-mandated testing such as Florida's CLAST essay examination could quite possibly be having an extremely negative impact on what is being taught and stressed in writing classrooms. Writing teachers who serve as evaluators of product-based writing tests are becoming increasingly comfortable with applying out-dated, product-based standards to pieces of writing, and are finding themselves applying these standards to their own students' writing. But the impact of writing tests such as Florida's CLAST goes far beyond

affecting the instruction and evaluative techniques of those who serve as CLAST raters. Entire English departments are being trained in CLAST scoring strategies and are applying product-based CLAST standards to their students' writing. I am in no way implying that there is anything wrong with training writing teachers to use holistic scoring techniques. It is the limited, product-based criteria behind the particular holistic scoring procedures I am speaking out against.

In Teaching and Assessing Writing, Edward White points out that "When the testing of writing is done properly, it supports teaching both practically and conceptually, involves teachers in test design, and helps bring recent discoveries about the teaching of writing into the classroom" (2). Writing tests such as Florida's CLAST are not doing that. Teachers of writing whose methods are based on current rhetorial research and theory should not have to set aside their preferred ways of viewing student writing when asked to serve as evaluators of state-mandated tests.

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